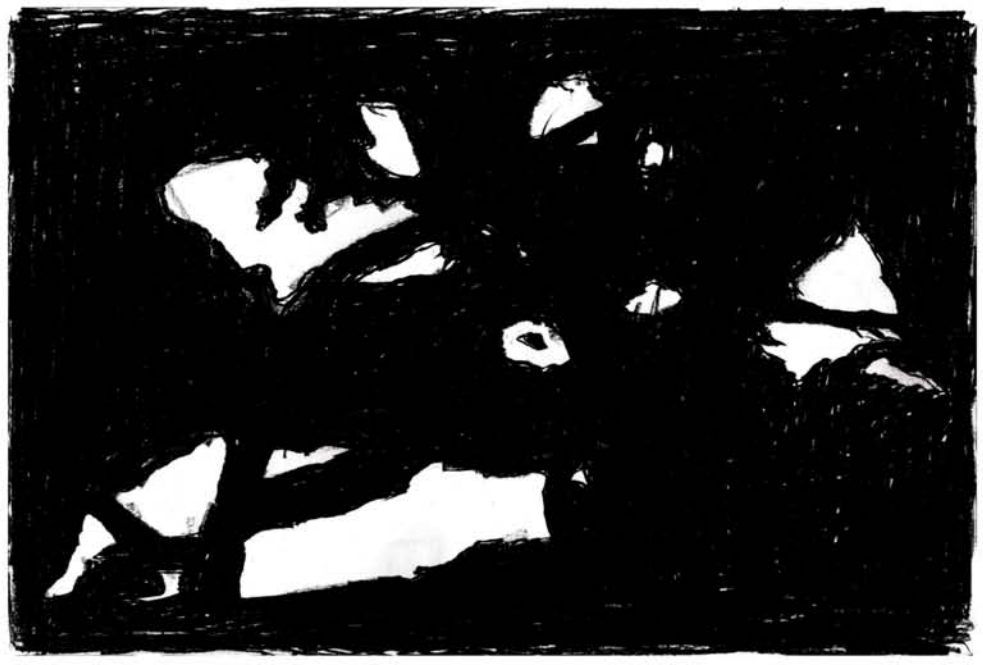
MARCELO GUIMARÃES LIMA

UMBRA



DRAWINGS

2015

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SHADOW DRAWINGS

Núcleo de Artes
CEPAOS
São Paulo, Brazil

2015

UMBRA : Shadow Drawings

Marcelo Guimarães Lima

Drawings are made by the movements of a hand over a surface (1). The record of hand movements in a two dimensional plane using specific line and tone producing tools (pencil, crayon, brush), turns "time into space", that is, it produces within a time related process a configuration of space. Forms are the result of processes of transformation: the static or completed figure carries within itself, in its structural results, the temporal layers of changes undergone, and perhaps those that could or can still occur in a future time. In this sense, every drawn form, every drawing is always provisional: it points beyond itself.

Drawings are also "found". Creases and fracture lines on a wall or on sidewalks, for instance, as well as different natural shapes and formations, can be isolated by perception as meaningful configurations, as traces and patterns of intrinsic formal interest. To see scenes and settings, battle scenes and odd landscapes for instance, on old stained walls as Leonardo suggested the painter should look for, is an exercise of imaginative vision: to find shapes in the world that suggest not simply the actual forms of reality, but the virtual forms of the work of art itself. Also, suggests Leonardo, to look at moving clouds. Indeed, their transitory and evanescent forms do recall something about the artist's perceptual and productive process of form searching that characterizes the act of drawing: the building and rebuilding of shapes, lines, etc., the simultaneous constructive and destructive aspects of the creation of the work of art.

On the origin of drawing in a shadow

The story of the origin of drawing, as told by Pliny, the Elder (2), states that the fixing of the contours of the shadow of a human profile on a wall, a portrait made by a Corinthian maid to serve as remembrance of her departing loved one, was the beginning of the figurative arts of the ancients. A fugitive form is made into a fixed pattern, as an *aide-mémoire* of the heart, both the sign of and the "replenishment", that is, the negation of an absence.

This kind of duality of the sign, at the same time "full" and "void", revealing a dialectics of presence and absence, is inscribed in all drawings, whether imaginative, "realistic" or

representational, and non-representational as well, a division or classification that loses much of its final character when we focus on the essentially "reductive" aspects of drawing, its confinement on the two-dimensional field and the relative paucity or simplicity of means (material and ideal) employed. Which are, on the other hand, precisely the conditions of drawing's flexibility and of its synthetic powers.

According to anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (3), to create reduced and yet complex models of the universe, is what art works do in fact. We may say: to encapsulate infinity within the finite, to shape, and bring to reflection, that is to knowledge, a sentient form of knowledge, the experience of self and the world, of self in the world as well as the world within the self.

A very brief history of cast shadows in painting

Ernst Gombrich observes in his brief examination of cast shadows in Western Art (4) the universality of modelling in the Renaissance, that is, the rendering of the proper shadow, the light and dark contrasts that belong to the surface of the objects, as essential to the depiction of forms in space. In contrast, he states, cast shadows are relatively rare in Renaissance painting. In fact, they represented a problem for the artist, as Leonardo advised in his *Treatise on Painting* against the use of harsh contrasts as disruptive of the atmospheric unity of the artwork. The shape or figure of the cast shadow risks also disturbing the planar composition, the careful arrangement of directions in the picture plane, the refined relations between orthogonal lines and the picture plane with its parallel layers, the calculated relations between horizontal, vertical and diagonal directions, the pursued, dynamic balance between surface and depth that characterizes many of the masterpieces of the High Renaissance.

After the paradigmatic works of the High Renaissance artists, the Mannerists disruptive artistic strategies would intensify the contrasts between lights and darks, and also generate new color harmonies and dissonances and new dynamic compositional patterns, preparing the way for the Baroque intensity of color and the use of shadows. With Caravaggio, the pioneer of Baroque art, darkness becomes the ground for the depiction of light. Intensifying the contrast of lights

and darks, the Italian artist was able at the same time to represent the solidity of bodies in space, to increase the effects of reality or realism in painting, and to generate new effects of transcendence, a particular synthesis of the material and the spiritual that would be enormously influential in the development of European art in the 17th century and beyond. The depiction of cast shadows in Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus* (1601), observes Gombrich, goes boldly against the cautious avoidance of cast shadows and their "perils" in the Renaissance tradition.

By contrast, states Gombrich, Late Baroque art favored the use of lighter colors softening contrasts, at the same time the Venetian *vedutisti*, such as Guardi, made use of strong light and cast shadows to create their spatial and architectonic effects of the Venetian vistas and urban spaces. The later developments of Impressionism in the 19th century, against the academic tradition of tonal contrasts, examined the translucency of cast shadows via color effects and relations. This would influence the Fauves and other contemporary styles that focused on color relations, on the specific luminosity of different colors, and on two dimensional pattern creations. Concentrating on the deconstruction of form, Cubism would introduce new functions for shadows and cast shadows as structural design elements beyond the descriptive traditions of Western Art.

It was, however in the paintings of Giorgio De Chirico in the early 20th century, that cast shadows would gain an unusual kind of protagonist role, contributing to the atmosphere of disquiet, of suspended time, of memory and premonition in the Italian painter's depictions of lone figures and monuments within deserted urban spaces with their classic references, the depiction of common and unusual fragments of objects and architecture, and in the use of silhouette, high contrast and acid color harmonies. In De Chirico's paintings, Andre Breton saw, as in a revelation, the seeds of Surrealism.

We can say that De Chirico, among other characteristics of his art, objectifies in specific ways aspects of the formal role and the universal symbolism of shadows that have permeated different times and cultures (Egyptian, Hindu, Greek, Roman) and that considered the shadow at the same time as a sign of reality, for only material bodies do cast shadows, and of unreality, for shadows are unstable and

fugitive phenomena, shadows cannot be touched and the human shadow can be seen as a double, an alter ego, a mark of a ghostly existence, and the emblem of death.

On drawing shadows

Try to fix the outlines of a cast shadow, observes Gombrich, and you will soon realize that the apparent "reasonableness" of Pliny's narrative is not exactly so. Shadows change with changing light conditions, also with the angle of vision, and to make matters more complicated, your own shadow, the shadow of your hand and of your body, will interfere with the cast shadow you see and try to capture. So the "logic" of Pliny's narrative may be the logic of fiction, but not exactly that of the real, material process of drawing. The path from reality to representation is not a straight or direct path: reality does not represent itself, shadows and mirrors (natural mirrors or artificial mirrors) are not in themselves the sources of visual representation but the echoes of representation as already established by human inventiveness

And yet, somehow the "models of nature" may have been operational also in the "invention" of drawing. Pre-historians have observed that many drawings on caves show an awareness of the natural forms and marks occurring in the walls and an adaptation of the represented animal figures to the existing contours and shapes of the given surface: as if natural forms, lines, protuberances, fissures, etc., suggested a representational form as a point of departure for the pre-historical artist's depicted animal figure. The artistic representation "completed" what nature had only started. Of course, the pattern-making capacity of the human mind is the primary component here, but the mimetic capacity in nature is not simply a human specificity, and, in a large sense, representation can be seen as a particular instance of the universal condition of reproduction, where like begets like, until a large or small turbulence interferes in the process and like begets something other.

"Umbra: Shadow Drawings"

The drawing of cast shadows, of their unstable figures, their distinct and yet evanescent forms and tones, mediates between memory and actuality, perception and recollection.

It is, therefore, emblematic of the act of drawing itself. This is the point of departure of our series **"Umbra: shadow drawings"** (5), it refers at the same time to the narrative of the symbolic origin of drawing, and to the "original" conditions or "founding" ground of the drawing process, considering that the gesture that made possible the "first" drawing and also its original emotional context of attachment and loss, proximity and distance in Pliny's tale, can be seen as a kind of ideal structural core of the historically layered process of the development of the graphic arts (*lato sensu*, that is, including drawing, painting, design, etc.) and as such it is "repeated" or re-enacted in every contemporary graphic action and work.

As we observed, Pliny's narrative constitutes a type of "fiction of origins". Representing that narrative, actualizing the imaginary action, we find ourselves finally in the gap between representation and reality, that is, the necessary distance between representation and the represented, between the symbol and the symbolized, between depiction and the depicted subject, which, according to Plato (6) constitutes the essential condition of the sign and of the signifying process. Representation and this is Plato's argument, is not simply reproduction as such but in every representation is given both the *likeness* and the *difference* between object and symbol, otherwise we would live among *simulacra*, and we would unavoidably behave like those who cannot distinguish between an image, a symbol, a dream and reality.

Levi-Strauss defined the work of art as a reduced model of the universe. We can state that a drawing is indeed a reduced model of the ***artistic*** universe as such. In its radical condition, the very "root" of all the visual arts, every drawing is the particular embodiment of the universal; it is an individual or unique aesthetic and artistic form pregnant with the totality of art.

Notes

(1) Including the "virtual surface" of a computer screen: movements of the hand searching to create a form are still the case in, at least, some common modes of digital image making.

(2) Pliny, the Elder - Natural History, Book XXXV, writes on the origin of relief portraiture by the sculptor Butades of Corinth who made a relief in clay after his daughter's tracing of the shadow profile of her departing lover. The narrative came to signify later the general beginnings of the figurative arts and was as such depicted in paintings, drawings and prints in the 18th century and the 19th century
An English translation (by J. Bostock, 1855) is available online from the Perseus Digital Library:
http://www.perseus.tufts.edu

(3) Levi-Strauss, C. – La pensée sauvage. Paris: Plon, 1962

(4) Gombrich, E.H. - Shadows, the depiction of cast shadows in Western Art.
New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014

(5) The Latin word "umbra" is used here in the general sense of shadow; we leave aside specialized nomenclature and technical distinctions of the classification of shadows and their components.

(6) The dialogue *Cratylus* by Plato in the translation of Benjamin Jowett is available at the Internet Classic Archives, MIT, http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/cratylus.html

UMBRA: Shadow Drawings

I have used two approaches in these drawings: depicting the shadow commonly as an object of observation (although a fugitive or unstable object), and tracing the contours of a shadow or parts of a shadow falling upon the sheet of paper. And that brings to mind the beginnings of photography and the theme of the “pencil of nature”, as Talbot designated the relative “automatism” of the process by which light and dark patterns were captured and fixed upon a light sensitive plate. In the case of photography, it could be said that nature “writes” or depicts itself. In the case of drawing, nature can’t do it by itself and needs a “helping hand”.



I. Marcelo Guimarães Lima - Shadow Drawings series, 2015



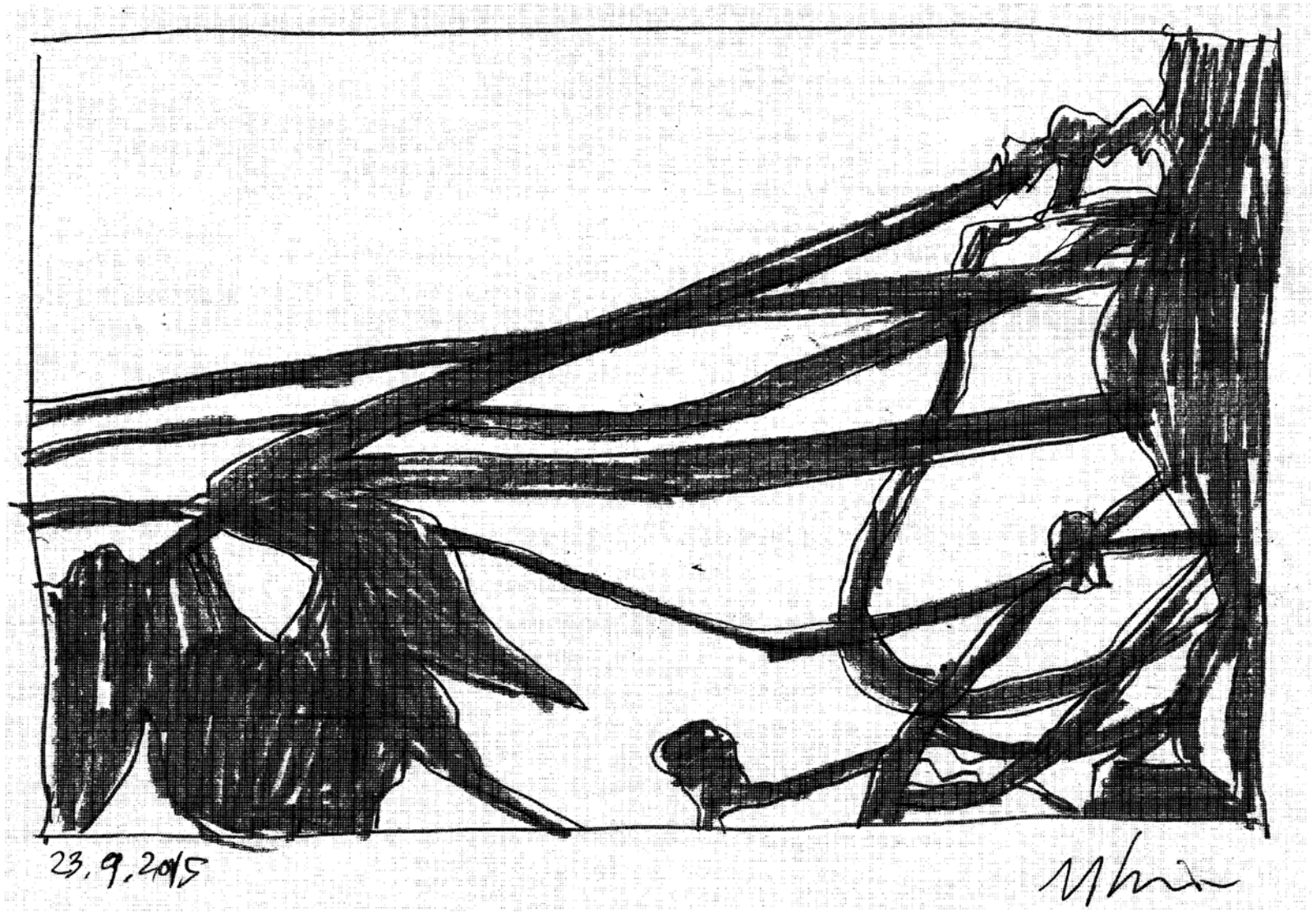
Il. Marcelo Guimarães Lima - Shadow Drawings series, 2015



Ill. Marcelo Guimarães Lima - Shadow Drawings series, 2015



IV. Marcelo Guimarães Lima - Shadow Drawings series, 2015



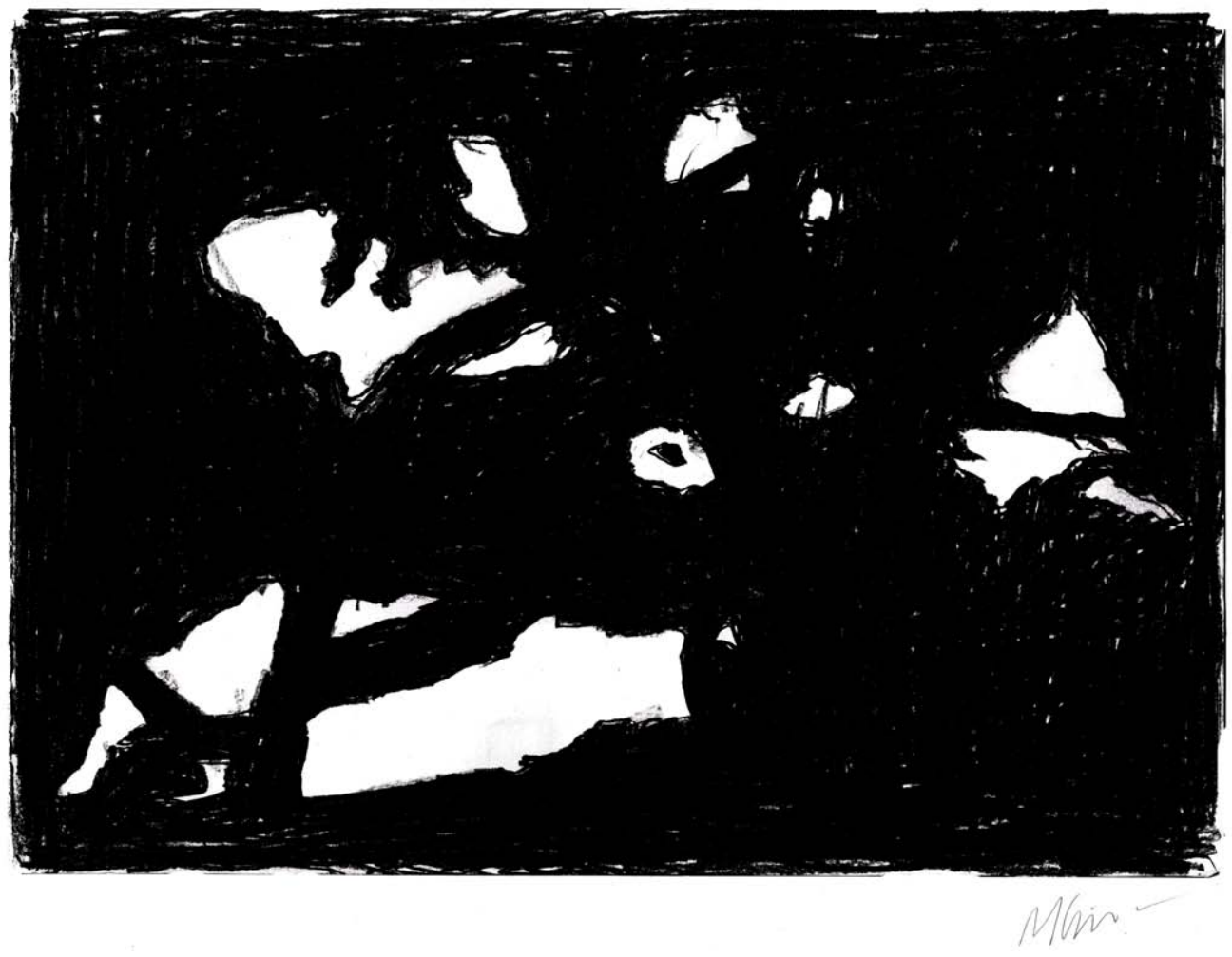
V. Marcelo Guimarães Lima - Shadow Drawings series, 2015



VI. Marcelo Guimarães Lima - Shadow Drawings series, 2015



VII. Marcelo Guimarães Lima - Shadow Drawings series, 2015



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